

WITHOUT POLICE

COMMUNITY SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY ALTERNATIVES IN THREE EXAMPLES

Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain, and the sustained uprising against police brutality, more of the general public in the so-called United States is abandoning the myth that police are capable of making our communities safer. In discarding this myth, we're being challenged to think critically about how we can reduce our society's reliance on policing institutions. But progressives are resistant to consider the complete abolition of the police. For those who are earnest in their desire for a more just world, their reluctance is often rooted in their inability to imagine what a world without police would look like.

Not only is it possible to have a policeless society, it is already the reality of a number of large-scale societies that have become much safer after dismantling their police institutions. Conversations debating police reform versus abolition quickly change course when people learn about their existence. This zine briefly describes three current societies that have developed successful alternatives for managing community safety: the autonomous regions in Northern Syria, the indigenous town of Chéran, Mexico, and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. The community defense forces and accountability processes they've created inspire us to think differently about how we can democratically meet our collective needs for safety.

Something all three of these societies share in common, and a large reason why they've been so successful in doing away with the police, is that they have also done away with their hierarchical, authoritarian forms of government and replaced them with directly democratic systems of governance. In working to reduce the root causes of crime and creating processes for communities to craft their own agreements, their needs for a designated group

MORE INFO:

1) Police Abolition and Other Revolutionary Lessons from Rojava, *ROAR Magazine article*

2) The Communes of Rojava: A Model in Societal Self-Direction, *YouTube documentary*

3) Chéran, an Inspiring Example of Direct Action, Community Democracy and Autonomy, *The Rhizome Network article*

4) Life Without Politicians: A Mexican Indigenous Community Finds its Own Way, *TruthOut.org article*

5) Zapatistas: Lessons in Community Self-Organization in Mexico, *OpenDemocracy article*

6) Zapatista-run Chiapas, *AnarchyInAction.org article*

Decisions take a long time to make, but carry the full support of the entire community.

COMMUNITY SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY

Zapatistas elect community members to serve in community safety roles. They aren't armed, uniformed, or professionalized. They're not paid and do not serve in this function permanently.[5] There's little information available on how this safety system works and the responsibilities and authority the people serving in it hold.

Each Zapatista community has its own judicial council and has the freedom to decide on the specifics of the punishment according to local context. Higher level councils handle difficult conflicts or offenses that involve non-Zapatistas. Because police and the state's judicial processes often make corrupt judgments, non-Zapatistas regularly seek conflict mediation through the Zapatista processes.

People who have hurt community members or the community are often ordered to do extra community work or pay fines. The effects judgments will have on the person's family and community are taken into consideration by the council.

It's been argued that the Zapatista territories are the safest place in Mexico and perhaps one of the safest in the world.[6]

of any kind, much less a professionalized, highly-weaponized one, to ensure their communities are safe and collective agreements are enforced has been significantly reduced. Of course citizens break agreements less when they can meaningfully help craft what those agreements are and when they have less of a need to break them.

These examples not only teach us that we can build alternative models for community safety, but also that we don't need to abolish the police just because they are brutal in their enforcement of the law. We need to abolish them because they serve on the frontlines of an oppressive system that benefits from a majority of the world living in poverty. Police aren't designed to prevent crime; they react to crime with threats and acts of violence, protecting a system that benefits off the poverty that fuels crime. These societies are just as interesting for the ways in which they've decreased reliance on other oppressive structures, like punitive justice systems and prisons, welfare programs, and top-down governmental regulations.

These societies aren't utopias. While they're genuinely exploring the root causes of social and domestic conflicts, people still act in ways that are harmful to each other and their community. While they don't have policing institutions, they do still have a need to provide the two main services we assume the police provide: protecting the community from outside threats and the enforcement of the community's agreements when necessary. All three have developed what can be generalized under the term "community defense forces."

Here are a few ways these community defense forces are different from police:

- They are made of up people from the communities they serve and are accountable to those communities. Processes to

recall people serving on these forces are provided and used.

- They're volunteer based rather than professionalized. People serving on the forces rotate so that more members of the community gain skills and experience being responsible for the community's safety.

- They enforce agreements made by the community through consensus, not laws that are made by some people to serve their own interests.

These forces are also complemented by accountability structures whose goal is to administer transformative rather than punitive justice when community agreements are violated. Because the enforcement of agreements and the repercussions of the violation of agreements are so intertwined, these communities' alternatives to our criminal courts and prison systems are touched on in this resource.

These societies are facing challenges that are very foreign to us in the so-called United States, and the cultural frameworks they're building these solutions from are also unique to each of them. But equally, their solutions are built on values that will also need to be at the foundation of the more just societies we build: the non-authoritarian democracy necessary for consensual governance, the decentralization of safety as a communal responsibility, the use of transformative justice rather than punitive justice.

In sifting through the limited information available in English about these communities online, we're still left with a lot of unanswered questions about how these defense forces and accountability structures function, what their challenges are, and what remains problematic about the ways they operate. These

THE ZAPATISTAS IN CHIAPAS

The Zapatistas are a network of rural, indigenous communities that have created a growing number of autonomous zones across Chiapas, Mexico. They've built, used, and refined a bottom-up form of government since they rose up against the Mexican government in 1994.

The Zapatistas reject any aid or intervention from the government and do not recognize the authority of their police or military. Instead, they assert their right and ability to meet their material needs and resolve communal conflicts themselves. Over 25 years they've created economic, educational, health, agricultural, and justice infrastructure to support their autonomy with the dream of creating "a world in which many worlds fit."

About 500,000 indigenous people in Chiapas identify as Zapatistas. A system of local community assemblies and overarching councils made up of elected delegates supports community members' ability to make decisions based on consensus.



revoked by the community at any time. Ronda members are also community members and are accountable through their relationships in the small town.

The rondas appear similar to state police in that they use uniforms, are armed, and have designated vehicles. It's unclear what their exact responsibilities and powers are, but it seems that their primary role is protecting the community from outside agitators rather than enforcing community agreements.

The town has formed a justice council, which works to mediate conflicts between people in disputes, but there's similarly not much information available about how this council works.

> "THE DETERMINATION OF OUR MOVEMENT IS SELF-PROTECTION. WHEN WE WERE THREATENED BY ORGANIZED CRIME, THE GOVERNMENT DIDN'T PAY ATTENTION TO US, AND NOW THEY WANT TO CO-OPT US AND INTERVENE.... TO BE PART OF THE UNIQUE STATE POLICE FORCE WILL MAKE US LOSE OUR AUTONOMY."
>
> *- Chéran community member, Pedro Chávez*

communities also don't claim that they've found perfect solutions to meet their communities' needs for safety and accountability. We should be careful to not romanticize them as we learn from them; they are still on the road to deconstructing oppressive systems and dreaming up more just alternatives. They may be some steps ahead of us in abolishing their police, but our capacity to dream up more just worlds and put them into practice will always be ongoing, collective work that we are also responsible for participating in.

With gratitude for the indigenous wisdom and courageous dreamwork the Kurds, Zapatistas, and Purépecha have built these alternatives out of, we can firmly assert that we do not need the police and move with greater certainty toward the realization of a new, more just world.

THE DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION OF NORTHERN SYRIA

The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), also known as Rojava, is a region in northeastern Syria that was liberated from the Syrian government in 2012 by a Kurdish militia. Autonomous zones in the liberated territories were created using the principles of anti-imperialism, radical feminism, decentralization of power, and ecology.

The DFNS is now home to about 2 million people of multiple ethnicities who participate in community assemblies, also known as communes, to make consensus-based decisions at the most local level possible. The communes coordinate and organize across the region through a network of councils made up of community-nominated delegates.



of self-governance and community protection and, since then, organized crime has dropped to almost nothing in Chéran. They now have the lowest level of violence in Michoacán and one of the lowest in all of Mexico. More communities are seeing Chéran's example as a viable alternative to corrupt politics and submission to organized crime; The indigenous Purépecha region surrounding Chéran is now forming a larger network of communities practicing self-governance to coordinate regional defense patrols.[3]

COMMUNITY SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY

When the police fled during the uprising, the community collected the police's weapons, vehicles, and uniforms and established their own defense force, or ronda. The community ronda is organized according to their traditional indigenous methods for community protection and is made up of community members who volunteer their time. They patrol the streets and maintain blockades at the town's entry points, where politicians, police, drug traffickers, and political campaign materials are prevented from entering. If something is wrong, they communicate by radio and the entire town goes on alert. Their members don't have sophisticated training, but they have permits to carry weapons.[3]

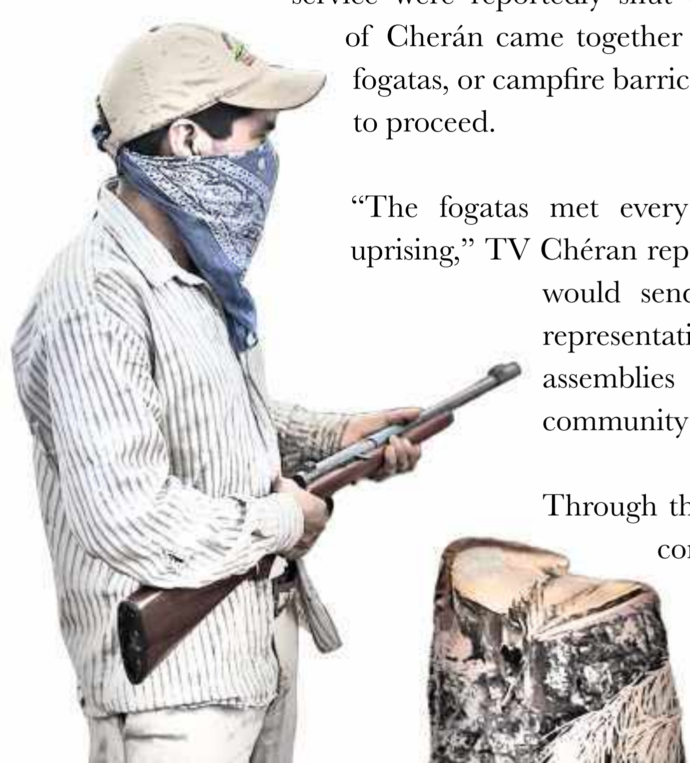
In addition to the community ronda, the forest ronda patrols the surrounding forests to protect more rural residents and the forests themselves. This volunteer-based team is trained in the terrain of the surrounding forests. They act as a powerful deterrence to the loggers and cartels still operating throughout Michoacán.[4]

Members of both the community and forest rondas can be

THE PURÉPECHA IN MICHOACAN

In 2011, Chéran, a 20,000-person indigenous community in Michoacán, Mexico, rose up against the illegal logging, the planting of narcotics in the community's forests, and the assassination of people who spoke out against this organized crime. The police and government agencies were benefiting from these activities and had done nothing when the community asked for help.

During the uprising, the community erected road barricades to ban the police, mayor, and political parties from entering their village. The barricades were defended by the community members armed with sticks. All cell phone, television, and radio service were reportedly shut off and the people of Cherán came together to organize nightly fogatas, or campfire barricades, to discuss how to proceed.



"The fogatas met every night during the uprising," TV Chéran reported. "Each fogata would send proposals and a representative to neighborhood assemblies and then to community assemblies."

Through these discussions, the community decided to return to their traditional forms

Over the last 8 years these communities have developed new systems of education, health, agriculture, security, justice, and military to meet their needs in ways that are aligned with their principles. Their justice systems emphasize restoration over retribution, their agricultural systems are built to be ecologically sustainable, their health and education systems are meant to empower the people who participate in them.

COMMUNITY SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY

In the DFNS, community safety and security is the responsibility of two community defense forces: the Asayish and HPC. The article *Police Abolition and Other Revolutionary Lessons from Rojava*[1] describes the two forces:

"The Asayish work as traffic controllers, arrest criminals, protect victims of domestic violence, serve as security guards at main governing buildings and control the movement of people and goods from one canton to another. The HPC in contrast, are people trained in basic security who only patrol their own neighborhood. The purpose of both forces is explicitly to protect the people from outside threats such as terrorist forces. It is always the HPC that protects a neighborhood, never the Asayish. The Asayish protects the city while the HPC protects the community. Both organizations have a gender quota of at least 40 percent women, if not more.

Through this alternative method, the possibility of instituting hierarchies of power and authority are considerably reduced. The people are protecting themselves. Security forces protect those who they live with and interact with daily in the neighborhood. This proximity ensures that violations occur only rarely. When they do occur, the neighborhood communes immediately activate

community mechanisms of justice, honor and restoration.

The chances of one group establishing a monopoly over this process are further reduced by the encouragement of everyone in the community to participate in a roster system. Anyone can volunteer. This explicitly includes the elderly, who have to take on more responsibility due to the fact that most young men and women are fighting at the front lines in the war against ISIS. Particularly women are active in civil protection. Nothing restores and empowers the soul of a traumatized, war-torn community more than seeing the matriarchs of a neighborhood stand confidently at street corners wielding AK-47 rifles for the people's protection. These images do not inspire fear and terror; they inspire communal confidence, pride, dignity, self-respect and belonging."

The Communes of Rojava[2], a short YouTube documentary, explains these forces' structure and responsibilities:

People who serve on these forces are trained in self-defense, feminism, tactics, and the ideology of stateless democracy. Neighborhoods are provided an opportunity to reflect on their community members' terms in these forces during a public meeting. The force members also critique their own failures and those of other members. The meetings don't carry authority or force, but are public suggestions to ensure people aren't getting attached to power and allow for collective improvement of the defense committee.

Representatives are also responsible for training all community members in self-defense. The goal is for every member of the commune to serve in the defense committee's representative role at some point so that safety becomes the responsibility of the

whole community.

The Communes of Rojava also details how social disputes are handled in the communes:

Only about one third of social disputes in the DFNS communities reach anything resembling a traditional court. All other disputes are solved within the communes themselves through Peace and Consensus Committees, organized groups in every commune.

Rotation is frequent so everyone eventually gets the experience of peacemaking. The goal of these committees is not to focus on punishment or blame, but to achieve a consensus between disputants. They are guided by the question: "How can we eliminate the conditions causing this person to harm?" instead of "How can we harm this person who harmed others?"

If it turns out the community norm the person broke no longer makes sense to the people living there, it can be changed thanks to the flexibility of direct democracy.

While most cases are resolved through dialogue and consensus, sometimes community sanctions may need to be brought towards an individual or group: in most cases, this would mean community work or work for the people who were hurt by their actions. There could also be a period of education related to the offense, a fine, work in a cooperative or public service, exclusion from the commune, or seclusion from some public rights.